SAMUEL TAYLOR COLERIDGE’S "KUBLA KHAN" AND THE WORKING OF IMAGINATION

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ملخص البحث

يعتبر كوليرج احد الشعراء الرومانسيين من الجيل الاول الذين اعتقدوا بأهمية الخيال كاجزء اساسي في القصيدة تمثل قصيدة "كوبلا كان" نظرية الخيال بصورة تطبيقية من خلال تتبع تطورها. يقدم البحث نظرية الخيال لكوليرج واهميتها في القصيدة التي تم تحليلها بالتفصيل أخيرا, تلخص الخاتمة ما توصل اليه البحث من نتائج.

الكلمات المفتاحية :كوليرج, الخيال, التخيل

Abstract

Coleridge is one of the first generation of romantic poets who believed in the importance of imagination as an essential part of the poem."Kubla Khan" introduces the poet's theory of imagination in practice throughout following the development of its progress. The research presents Coleridge's theory of imagination and its value in the poem which is analyzed in details. Finally, the conclusion sums up the findings of the research.

Keywords: Coleridge,imagination,fancy

As a child, Coleridge was a wonderful dreamer and reader. He read romances and the eastern tales as The Arabian Nights that were widespread at that time. At school and university he kept reading especially in works of imagination and visionary philosophy. In March 1798, Coleridge wrote to his brother that his ambition in poetry was to raise the imagination and put the affections the correct way by the true spirit and the human life. Imagination played an important role in both life and work. The year 1797 was the beginning of his active imagination, during which he wrote ‘Kubla Khan’ that talks about poetic inspiration. He believed in the value of human imagination which is in the center of their experience.(barth 71)

Imagination is deep-rooted in literature all over the world. It may have its origin in the unconscious, but it is kept controlled by the power of will and understanding. (Brett 93) It has been defined variously,

As a power responsible for visual images, singly or in association; as the capacity for making from these images ideal combinations of character and objects…; as the faculty which creates the symbol of abstract conception…; and as creation itself.(Shipley 156))

As a method of thinking and as an approach to literature, Romanticism was connected with “vitality, powerful emotion, limitless and dreamlike ideas.” (Inglisa&Spear 398) Romantic poets were interested in the matter of imagination and this interest was strengthened by facts that are both religious and metaphysical. In refusing Locke’s and Newton’s ideas about the visible world, the romantic poets followed a call which was inside them to discover more fully the realm of the spirit. They were different in their ideas about how to arrange the things they saw and knew, and this was the aim of their passionate search. The romantic poets wanted to enter in a never-ending reality to discover its mysterious things, and by this act to know more clearly what life and what was it worth mean. There was a belief among them that though the concrete things were the tools by which they find this

reality, they were not everything and had little importance unless they were connected with some embracing and sustaining power. Also, they cared about things that were related to the spirit and wished that by imagination and inspired insight they could both understand them and express them in a "compelling poetry."(Bowra 9)

Coleridge's concept of imagination was not new. The neo-classical poets, before him, claimed that the aesthetic norm is obtained by a means, or good combination of extremes. The imaginative agreement is of "sameness, with difference,"the sense of novelty and freshness, with old and well-known objects. Overall, the great poetry brings into harmony the opposites of nature and art, and it forms a mixture and harmonizes the realistic with the artificial, with bringing art from nature. Coleridge thought that the best piece of language is that which is brought from reflection on the acts of the mind. The simple language has little share in these processes and results of imagination. Also, he believed that"What is a poetry?" is similar or nearly the same question to "What is a poet"that the answer to one of them is engaged in the solution of the other. This point of difference came from the poetic genius itself:

The poet, described in ideal perfection, brings the whole soul of man into activity… .He diffuses a tone and spirit of unity, that blends , and fuses, each into each, by that synthetic and magical power ,to which we have exclusively appropriated the name of imagination. (Saeed 7-9)

In Coleridge's doctrine of poetic creation, imagination is a 'shaping spirit,'and poetry a 'rationalized dream,'something directed as well as sensed. The divine analogue for him is'Creation,'as God brought order out of chaos, so the poetic imagination brings form and meaning out of the raw material of experience.

More than any other English romantic poet, Coleridge brought about the revolution in literary thought in regarding imagination as the sovereign creative power, expressing the development of a complete personality. He began with imagination as the great ordering principle or a power that enables to differentiate and to arrange, to separate and to synthesize, and thus makes perception possible. Without the power of imagination there would be only a collection of meaningless sense data. Imagination is seen as an act for bringing order out of chaos. Coleridge gave much thought to imagination that he devoted important chapters in Biographia Literaria to it.(Ibid.5-6)

His theory of imagination is an organic one. This means that the process of creation as it happened in the poet's mind is similar to a process of nature. The first idea for any poem might be very small, and the development grows gradually in the poet's mind as he comes across deeper and deeper layers of experience. So, the poem produces itself as a result of this process of organic growth that possesses organic unity. Coleridge names imagination an "esemplastic" power, that means a "plastic or shaping power" which results into "one" or into an 'organic unity.' Thus, in designing any work of art, the artist should keep in mind an over-all view of the whole, or that which Coleridge describes as the "sur- view" which "enables a man to foresee the whole of what he is to convey."(Bowra 15-6)

Leadbetter divided Coleridge's poetry into early and late as if the last years added enlightened his early adventures .(Leadbetter xiii) Coleridge believes that imagination is the 'agent of reason' .So, the relationship between imagination and reason is significant in any piece of writing. As Coleridge argues in chapter XVIII of the Biographia Literaria: 'Could a rule be given from without,' poetry would not be poetry, and becomes merely a mechanical art; the

same is true for all imaginative writings. The arrangement of our experience into literary fiction is not a manipulation of experience for practical ends. Its main purpose is to give pleasure. Part of this pleasure is the raise of our understanding. The other part is the stimulation and satisfaction of our emotions. These two parts can never be separated, for literature is not dealing only with perceptual experience but with the raise of our sensibility.(Baker 137-8)

Coleridge thinks that imagination throws the charm of novelty over old and familiar themes. In a letter to his friend Richard Sharp at January 1804, Coleridge calls imagination a 'divine analogue of creation.' This 'analogue' takes a central part in Coleridge's exposition of the theory of imagination in Biographia Literaria, when he says in chapter XIII that imagination is "a repetition in the finite mind of the eternal act of creation in the infinite I AM"; for the poetic imagination expresses thought by means of symbols.(Brett 7)

In the Biographia Literaria, Coleridge discusses the two types of imagination 'primary and secondary,' and distinguishes between 'Imagination and Fancy'. True poetry for him will hold in balance sameness and difference; the general and the concrete; the idea and the image; the individual and representative; the novel and the familiar; emotion and order; judgment and feeling. At first sight what Coleridge is saying here might not seem to be in harmony with what he has written about imagination, but deep thinking shows that this passage fits exactly with the theory of imagination. To make his discussion clear, Coleridge concludes chapter XIV with a quotation from a poem by Sir John Davies. The quotation describes the operation of the human soul but with slight change the words may be applicable to the poetic imagination:

Doubtless this could not be, but that she turns
Bodies to spirit by sublimation strange,
As fire converts to fire the thing it burns,
As we our food into our nature change.
From their gross matter she abstracts their forms,
And draws a kind of quintessence from things;
Which to her proper nature she transforms
To bear them light on her celestial wings.
Thus does she, when from individual states
She doth abstract the universal kinds;
Which then re-clothed in divers names and fates
Steal access through our senses to our minds.(Ibid. 85)

It was the power of the mind that Coleridge recognizes as 'imagination'; an agency that has a 'middle quality between a thought and a thing'. The first two stanzas set clear what he means by the primary imagination; the rest describes the secondary imagination which is similar to the primary in the type of its agency and different in degree and mode of operation.(Ibid.94)

If the act of creation is conceived as being the bringing of order out of chaos, then primary imagination is creative. The secondary imagination is the conscious human use of this power. When someone uses the primary imagination in the act of perception, he is not doing this with his conscious will but instead he is exercising the central faculty of his awareness of himself and the external world. The secondary imagination is more conscious and less elemental, but it is not different in kind from the primary. It makes and creates new combinations of meaning. The employment of the secondary imagination is a poetic activity, and this is why Coleridge moves from the discussion of a poem to a discussion of the poet's

activity when realizing that the poet for him belongs to the larger company of those who are distinguished by the activity of their imagination. Any poem is always the work of a poet, of a man making use of secondary imagination and so achieving the harmony of meaning reached to by opposite things. But the poem is also a specific work of art produced by a special handling of language. The harmony which results from the special creative awareness achieved by the practice of imagination cannot operate over an extended composition long poem, therefore, should be based on a style that has the ability to draw a more continuous and equal attention than the language of prose.(Ibid.95)

The two terms ‘primary and secondary’ depend on the amount of the “I AM,” that self-conscious which may be described as “perpetual self-duplication of one” and similar power into object and subject which can exists only as antithesis. In the operative power of an individual power exists the production and mystery of production and life. This same principle serves as a base for Coleridge’s theory of poetic creation and this is the point he clarified when he says:

The primary imagination I should hold to be the living power and prime Agent of all human perception, and as a repetition in the finite mind of the eternal act of creation in the infinite I AM. The secondary imagination I consider as an echo of the former… .(Daiches 107-8)

Coleridge wants to say that the synthesizing powers of imagination can produce genuine creation. It blends, fuses, and reproduces given elements in a new pattern to produce a novel whole. These elements may not be in agreement but the outcome is a new existence in which all different elements or forces harmonize. So, in the creation of poetry, imagination echoes the creative principle underlying the whole universe.

In a conversation recorded by Crabb Robinson in his Diary on November 15, 1810, Coleridge made a distinction between fancy and imagination. The highest degree of fancy is ‘delirium,’ of imagination ‘mania’ .Fancy is the arbitrary way of arranging things that lie far away together, in order to form one whole. The raw materials lie beforehand for fancy, which acts by a sort of juxtaposition. On the other hand, imagination generates and creates a form of its own. (Saeed 7)

In the “Note on Fancy and Imagination” in Lascees Abrecrombie, The Idea of Great Poetry; he approaches the matter differently concluding that the faculty of fancy does not exist. Fancy is one of Coleridge’s chimeras and it is nothing but a degree of imagination: the degree of it concerns not the quality of the imagery, but the quality and force of the emotion symbolized by imagery.(Lowes 315-7)

T. S. Eliot regards Coleridge’s distinction between Fancy and Imagination of great importance because he is the first writer who has fixed this permanent distinction. He suggests that fancy may be no more than a mode of memory emancipated from the order of space and time, but it seems untrue to talk of memory in relation to fancy only and omit it from imagination. As it is proved in Lowes’s Road to Xanadu that memory plays a major role in imagination. This distinction need not give the reader a distinct cut line between imagination and fancy, but only a degree of imaginative success. Finally, “GOOD SENSE is the BODY of poetic genius, Fancy its DRAPERY, MOTION its LIFE, and IMAGINATION the SOUL that is everywhere, and in each.”(Eliot 76)

According to Coleridge's own account of his school days, he learned as a boy from his teachers that poetry has a severe logic as that of science. This logic is more difficult because it is more ingenious, complex, and dependent on more temporary causes.(Watson 110) Also, a poem for Coleridge is the father of holism, and a composition, which offers "to itself such delight from the whole, as is compatible with a distinct gratification from each part." The importance lies in the whole poem, while reflecting something back to the parts has to grow out of parts that are themselves important.(Kermode 155)

The notion of 'organic unity' is very familiar to Coleridge's view of poetry in a larger sense and a poem as a particular handling of language. In discussing the place of rhyme and meter in a poem, Coleridge remarks that nothing can please for a long time which does not contain in itself the cause why it is so. The thing which is added merely for ornament or decoration cannot really please in a poem. Every characteristic in a poem must grow out of its whole nature and be an important part in it.

This argument is also related to Coleridge's distinction between imagination and fancy. Imagination is fit to obtain the true unity of expression, it "dissolves, diffuses, dissipate, in order to recreate." But fancy "has no other counters to play with but fixities and definitis." Imagination operates in a manner similar to organic or physical growth. It is described not as a power of fitting together a number of separate parts but a flowering forth of organic unity.(Daiches 109)

"Kubla Khan" is written in Coleridge's mid-twenties. He called it 'A Vision in a Dream Fragment,' and did not publish it till 1816.It is a perfect expression of the joy of creativity. It is one of the most magnificent poems written on the theme of poetic inspiration. It was composed in a lonely farmhouse as he was gradually waking from an opium dream. He had been reading an account of Marco Polo's thirteenth-century visit to China, where he met the emperor Kubla. In dream, he was able to make all his powers awake. The dreamer was able to give a concrete shape for his dreams, and to mix the disconnected elements of his readings in a magical combination.

"Kubla Khan" is a typical example of the working of imagination because it gathers all its components into a complete whole. Some critics claim that "Kubla Khan" can only be explained in relating its images to esoteric philosophy, yet it can certainly interpreted as a poem about poetic vision. As the theme of the poem is concerned, it is an obscure poem because the poetic vision is only indirectly related to moral values and the border issues of life. The poem is divided into three parts. In part one, the khan orders a "pleasure-dome" to be built. This dome is the recurrent and central image in the poem. Details about the length of Kubla' s pleasure-garden, its rich variety of natural beauties, with clarity that is surprising are given. The picture which is given is of an Earthly Paradise. Life is compared to a river "Alph" flowing into the sea of death. The second part is also very rich in its images and it completes the picture of Kubla's Paradise, but give a sense of fear when it describes the final complete destruction of the river. The river, representing life that is seen from the earth, flows slowly and with a "mazy motion", through a walled garden and finally enters the "caverns measureless to man" before sinking into a "lifeless ocean." In contrast to the "sunless sea" of death, the dome is "sunny." It is a good representation of life. The third part begins with a strong literary-geographical change of the scene. The move is from kubla's Paradise which is taken from Purchas's Pilgrimage to the unusual paradise of Mount Abora which Coleridge

took from Milton. Then the poet affirms that he can himself built a magical dome similar to Kubla's dome, if only he could recall the song of the "Abyssinian maid. " His dome is in air, it is a dome of poetry. Those who hear his poetry will say that he has "drunk the milk of Paradise."(Wilson xxxviii)

Coleridge's view about dreams seems more significant and dreams-like poems seem to have "logic by their own";

Call it a moment's work (and such it seems)
This tale's a fragment from the life of dreams,
But say that years matur'd the silent strife,
And 'it's a record from the dreams of life.(Watson 121)

"Kubla Khan" is a poem about the rapture of imaginative achievement. There are many interpretations for the place of stress in the single line "Could I revive within me" that gives different meanings. If a strong stress is put on 'Could,' the line can be taken to give the meaning "If only I could, but I can't,' therefore, the whole poem can be about the frustration of the creative power. But if the stress is weak, then the condition is open. The word "once" in the line "in a vision once I saw" also becomes a weak syllable, not giving the meaning "Once, only once and, I fear, never again," but instead giving a surprise and a sense of unique privilege.(Jones& Tydemon 201)

The poem is the greatest victory in English literature of what F. W. Bateson calls "the critical Muse." For the Khan, just like the poet, is meant to bring together opposite things. The dome the Khan ordered lies on "twice five miles" of man-made gardens that contain a "deep romantic chasm," where the sacred river Alph is found.(Ibid.)

A mighty fountain momently was forced:
A mid whose swift, half intermittent burst
Huge fragments vaulted like rebounding hail. (19-21)

The sound of the"fountain"and the caves are tamed into the"mingled measure"of art.(Watson 110) In the last stanza, the similarity with poetry is very clear,

I would build that dome in air,
That sunny dome! those caves of ice!
And all who heard should see them there. (46-8)

Coleridge, as a poet, is re-creating the things that he observes, but in a way which he felt to be strange and frightful,[1]"And all should cry, Beware! Beware! "(49)

Coleridge's belief in the power of imagination is connected with his own sadness, sickness and opium usage. All these elements working with each other have united with his "shaping-spirit" turning imagination sometimes into a nightmare. Although he stayed unsure about the frame of poetic imagination, yet his explanation of its qualities is the basic of most of his original works. He tried to find a place for all the things, which are related with "romance" as giving a way of knowing the extent of human experience.(Ibid)

The poem is important for Coleridge's theory of imagination because it is difficult not to notice the symbolic force of the lines:

But oh! that deep romantic chasm which slanted
Down the green hill athwart a cedarn cover!
A savage place! as holy and inchanted

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By woman wailing for her demon-lover!
………………………………………………..
Or chaffy grain beneath the thresher's flail. (12-22)

The symbol here is for the unlimited energy of creation, welling up, a "subterranean fountain." Attention is drawn to the outcome of the poem; the poet felt the presence of an evil character "demonic lover." Coleridge tried to express through this his wishes and what he wants to achieve in reality,

Could I revive within me
Her symphony and song,
……………………………..
I would build that dome in air,
……………………………………
And all should cry, Beware! Beware!
His flashing eyes, his floating hair! (42-50)

Everyone probably felt that sense, waking from a dream of something irrecoverable and precious.(Britannica 841) Eliot complains about the poem's "exaggerated repute." He says that the symbols of the poem whatever its origin in Coleridge's mind, went to the inner of Coleridge's emotions. And organization is necessary as well as "inspiration." Although the poem does not fit the standards of Eliot, yet there is more organization in it, the logic of a dream of imagination.(Baker 179-80) To sum up, the unconscious and combinations of thought were of supernatural and magical value in the composition of 'Kubla Khan'. The poet was half awake when he composed it. Though he blamed William Wordsworth for using realistic and simple images in his poems, yet he himself used this matter-of-factness which means that both the realistic and the supernatural are needed in creating an imaginative work of art. Also, there is no real separation between fancy and imagination but they complete each other to form what Coleridge saw when he was listening to the song of the maid, an organic perfect whole.

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